

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ news release

Edelsberg - 343-5634

FEATURE MATERIAL

A bird that carries the banner of its new and thriving State, that is cousin to the plentiful Canada goose, and whose likeness appears on duck stamps carried by nearly two million hunters in the United States--faces an uncertain future despite appreciable progress in recent years. The bird is the Hawaiian goose, the Nene (pronounced "nay-nay"), native only to that State, and its official bird.

The efforts of Hawaii and the U. S. Department of the Interior increased the number of geese from 25-60 in 1948 to between 300 and 500 today. Even so, this is not considered adequate for survival.

The Nene has been ravaged by wild dogs, pigs, and mongooses. It has not reproduced itself in sufficient numbers. Conservationists believe that the Nene can be saved if the current aid program is expanded, more habitat is dedicated, and greater protection from its predators is provided.

The Nene, both male and female, is grayish brown. The top of its body is dark brown, the sides and belly are light brown, and its neck is creamy. Tail, wings, bill, and feet are black. Its feet are only partially webbed because it has been away from water a long time. It lives on berries and greens. The goose lays 4 or 5 light-brown eggs.

Home to the Nene are the old lava flows on the slopes of active Mauna Loa and a neighboring extinct volcano, 5,000-7,500 feet above the Pacific. This habitat is barren, rugged, and formidable. But, here and there, it is broken by heavily forested Kipukas, which are portions of the mountain slopes missed by recent lava flows. The Nene go to these lush "holes" in the blanket of lava to nest and rear their young. For protection from wild pigs, dogs, and hunters, they roost in a type of lava flow that has a surface like a floor of broken bottles.

Researchers estimate that once there were 25,000 Nene in the Hawaiian Islands. But predators, hunting (today forbidden), and the loss of habitat decimated their ranks. In 1948, when the Legislature of Hawaii appropriated \$6,000 to help save the bird, there were only 13 in captivity and 12 to 50 in the wild. Hawaii's program included a study of the relationship between the Nene and its environment, the setting aside of 8,100 acres as sanctuary, the breeding of captive birds, and the release of their offspring into former wild habitats.

In 1958, Congress passed a bill authorizing the annual expenditure of \$15,000 for a program of research, propagation, and the management necessary to effect the restoration of the Nene to its natural habitat. The program is carried out by Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources, under contract to the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

In 1964, thirty-seven goslings were reared. By 1964, a total of 150 geese had been released into the wild. Most of these birds were reared in the State's game farm, but 49 were supplied by the Wildfowl Trust in England. The action of the Wildfowl Trust was a case of birds being sent home to roost. The Trust had received three birds from Hawaii in 1951 and had remarkable success in propagating them.

Today there are between 300 and 500 Nene, more than half in captivity. The wild flock is located only on the islands of Hawaii and neighboring Maui. Only birds reared locally were released on Hawaii. Those released on Maui are considered insufficient to overcome adverse factors.

The present State game farm stock of 17 pairs cannot produce enough birds to make sure that the species will thrive.

Conservationists are hoping that the new Land and Water Conservation Fund will provide additional sanctuaries for the Nene. They believe that a restoration program, to be successful, must do the following: modernize the propagation facilities to allow better handling of the captive stock; buy more space for sanctuaries; continue the control of predators, and develop the best combination of habitat factors to sustain a wild Nene population of at least 500 birds on Maui and 500 on Hawaii.

Three Nene were taken to the National Zoological Park in Washington, D. C., in the spring of 1964. The zoo is undergoing a major renovation, and signs inform visitors that "some animals will be housed in seemingly strange but temporary quarters." The Nene are visitors in the house of the great cats--lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars, and panthers.

The Nene share a cage with one Shoebill, a strange, misplaced wading bird from the White Nile in Africa. At mealtime, in late morning, the Nene bow their heads over a tin tray of greens and eat slowly and noiselessly. The Shoebill ignores them. Directly across the floor behind bars, the eyes of the leopards are riveted on them.

x x x



NENE GESE AS THEY APPEAR ON FEDERAL DUCK STAMP